

WORKSHOP 11 Gender Roles

RATIONALE

During adolescence conformity within same-gender peer groups and a reliance on stereotyped notions of gender offer young people a “safe” way of relating to others. This workshop helps participants explore the concept of gender-role stereotyping, how prevalent it can be and how constraining it may ultimately be on their relationships with others. Participants consider how gender roles affect the ways they lead their lives and the decisions they make about their lives in the present and for the future. This activity may also begin to break down some of the barriers to open communication and empathy among young women and men.

NOTE: This session focuses on male and female gender identities; the next workshop will introduce the idea of transgender identities.

Time Required: 45 minutes

GOALS

To help participants

- become familiar with the idea of gender roles and their impact on our daily lives.
- clarify their own ideas about their gender and other genders.
- explore the range of perceptions and misconceptions people have about each gender.
- gain insight into the similarities as well as the differences between females and males.

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this workshop, participants will be able to

- demonstrate an understanding of the influence of gender roles on their lives by describing how they believe their lives would change if they were a different gender.
- show empathy for people of other genders by naming what they believe is hard about having other gender identities.
- demonstrate an understanding of misconceptions about their own gender by naming the aspects of the stories written about their gender they believe to be inaccurate.
- show an understanding of the similarities between females and males by describing the ways their lives would stay the same if they were another gender.

MATERIALS

- Writing paper
- Pens or pencils

PREPARATION

- Review this workshop and decide how to share leadership responsibilities with your coleader.
- Choose one of the various approaches to the Writing Stories activity.
- Post the ground rules from the opening session.

Activities

WRITING STORIES

15 minutes

1. Introduce this activity by explaining that we don't often think about how our gender affects the way we lead our lives—the people with whom we interact, the activities in which we become involved, and the decisions that we make on a daily basis. Tell participants that this exercise is an opportunity to examine gender and gender expectations by imagining what their lives would be like if they were another gender.
2. Hand paper and a pen or pencil to each participant. Explain that participants are to imagine that they wake up one morning and discover they are a different gender. Ask them to write a story about what the day would be like. Tell them they should assume they would be the same people they are now with the same interests, strengths, and personalities, just a different gender. Give them 15 minutes to write the story. Be sure to warn them when they have about 3 minutes remaining so that they can write an ending to their stories.

Alternatives

Depending on the age and ability of your group, you may decide to conduct this activity differently.

- Rather than write a story, have participants describe the thoughts, feelings, ideas, and images they have when thinking about being another gender.
- If the group is young or members seem unable to work on their own for 15 minutes, consider using question prompts to aid and direct their stories.
- Use the prompts that follow to engage the group in a guided imagery exercise. Ask participants to get comfortable and close their eyes while ideas, situations, and images are suggested to them. Ask them to picture, as best as they can, the images that come to them. Begin by saying, "Imagine that one morning you wake up to discover that you are the other gender." Then ask,
 - What would your morning ritual be like?
 - What would your interactions with friends be like?
 - Would interactions with teachers be any different?
 - Would people treat you differently than they do now? Would your teachers, parents, friends?
 - Would your best friend still be your best friend?

- What about your life would stay the same?
- What new hardships might arise for you that do not exist now?
- What difficult aspects about your life now might get easier if you were the other gender?

To process the imagery, ask participants to share some of their reactions, thoughts, and feelings to the different images and questions posed.

SHARING STORIES

10 minutes

When the group has finished writing, ask for four volunteers, two female and two male, to read their stories aloud. Ask participants to listen for similarities to their own stories as well as differences. Also ask them to think about whether the perceptions about being their gender seem accurate or inaccurate.

NOTE: This activity may generate feelings and thoughts that are extremely negative, particularly in young men who are asked to imagine themselves as females. If this occurs, it is important to spend some time talking about why there is such a negative association with being a female for some males. How do these negative feelings affect the way girls and young women think of themselves? The way boys and men think of themselves? Do you think that society values males more than females? Why? Engage the group in a discussion of how they feel when they hear negative feelings expressed about their own or another gender.

GENDER REVERSAL DISCUSSION

20 minutes

1. Ask the group to talk about their own stories as well as the ones read aloud.

Encourage the discussion with questions like these:

- Was anyone surprised by anything he/she wrote?
- What was hard about being another gender?
- What was easy about being another gender?
- What was difficult for you to imagine?
- What aspects of being another gender would you keep, if you could?
- Which gender do you think has it easier in this society? Why?
- Ask females: What in the stories you heard from males do you think was accurate? Why? Inaccurate? Why? How did you feel listening to the males' perceptions of life as a female?
- Ask males: What in the stories you heard from females do you think was accurate? Why? Inaccurate? Why? How did you feel listening to the females' perceptions of life as a male?
- As you imagined being a different gender, did you find there were more things that would be different or more things that would stay the same?
- In general, do you think that men and women are more similar or more different?

2. Conclude by defining the term *gender role* as the way we behave in our lives and interact with other people based on the expectations of the ways males and females ought to behave, feel, and think. Tell participants that although we often depict males and females as opposites (e.g., the "war of the sexes," "the opposite sex"), men and women are really much more alike than different. Point out that society's expectations

of how each gender should behave and think have a very powerful influence over our lives. Explain that some argue that by adhering to strict gender roles, both genders lose the opportunity to express the parts of themselves that do not match stereotyped beliefs about their gender. Tell participants that what we believe about how people of each gender should behave can have a stronger impact on our thoughts and behaviors than our biology does. Say that they will investigate this more in the next workshop.